



MAY NEWSLETTER  
2018-2019 NUMBER 8

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# FRIENDS OF AMERICAN WRITERS CHICAGO

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## President's Message

CHRISTINE SPATARA, *President*

The May luncheon is our awards luncheon when we proudly present our literary winners to our membership. In the category of adult fiction, we have *Severance* by Ling Ma and *The Wonder that was Ours* by Alice Hatcher. For

young adult fiction, we have three winners--Gloria Chao, *American Panda*, Adib Khorram, *Darius the Great is not Okay*, and Oge Mora, *Thank You Omul!* We would like to thank Tammie Bob and her Adult Literature committee and



Angela Gall and her Young Adult Committee for their hard work and dedication. I would like to thank everyone for their faithful attendance this past year and for your generosity to our Patrons Fund. Enjoy your summer and see you in September.

## ANNUAL AWARDS

### Literature Awards Committee

TAMMIE BOB, *Chairman*

### Introducing the 2018 FAW Literature Award Winners

by Tammie Bob

This year the adult literature committee has two award winners, both novels by two very talented new writers. The committee received many wonderful entries and our decision followed months of reading and hours of spirited discussion. Both prize winners are beautifully written, with thought-provoking, entertaining plots. Neither book is easily categorized. I am proud to describe the books to you here.

#### First Prize

*Severance*, by Ling Ma

In a way, Ling Ma's shocking and ferocious novel, *Severance*, is a play on the "Why I Left New York" theme, but it's one you'll actually want to read. The novel's protagonist, Candace Chen, departs the city she's called home for years not because of a tough job market or skyrocketing rent, but because the world as we know it is coming to an end. It's a fierce debut from a writer with seemingly boundless imagination.

Candace's life in New York might not be what she dreamed of, but it's not all that bad. She has a respectable job at a



Ling Ma

publishing production firm, where she outsources printing jobs to facilities in China. She and her boyfriend pass the time watching movies in his basement apartment. As a hobby, she maintains NY Ghost, a blog featuring her photographs of life in the city.

But then things start to get complicated. A mysterious disease called

Shen Fever, a fungal infection that originated in China, starts to move through the country, turning its victims into a unique type of zombie. The death count rises so quickly that the news media, fearing a panic, stops reporting it.

*Severance* goes back and forth in time, contrasting Candace's tedious office job with her travels across post-apocalyptic America. It's a technique Ma uses to great effect — it's jarring, in a great way, making the horror of her new circumstances all the more intense. It works especially well in the novel's most terrifying scene, when Bob orders Candace to execute a young, ailing girl — directly afterwards, Ma shifts scenes to Candace's

job interview, where she tries to explain to an executive why she'd be good at overseeing the production of Bibles.

And while *Severance* has elements of a horror novel, there's much more to it than that. It's a wicked satire of consumerism and work culture — the character of Bob comes across as a typical, power-hungry middle manager; Ma seems to be suggesting that even in the event of an apocalypse, you can't escape pointless bureaucracy. But Ma never overplays her hand — art that's critical of capitalism (or any political or economic system) can turn didactic and humorless very quickly, but *Severance* never does.

We're not the only ones who loved this book: Ling Ma, who is an English professor at the University of Chicago, will be participating in the Sydney Writer's Festival in Australia the week of our Awards Luncheon. However, we will make every effort to have her as one of our Luncheon speakers next year.

### Second Prize:

*The Wonder that was Ours* by Alice Hatcher

"Really, though, what did Franz Kafka know about cockroaches?" Not much compared to Hatcher, who makes a group of roaches the narrator of her debut novel. Although the concept seemed revolting to nearly all of us at first, the dirty little creatures soon endeared themselves to us for their wisdom and compassion.

It isn't necessary to know the history of banana republics or labor movements to follow this bright novel. For readers who could use a refresher course, the cockroaches (speaking in the royal "we") offer a humorous yet painstaking political and social history of a fictitious Caribbean island that runs parallel to political movements throughout history.

An assortment of quirky characters brings this history to



Alice Hatcher

life—most notably the cabbie/bartender Wynston Cleave, known as Professor Cleave by family, friends, and the cockroaches that permeate his taxi. Years earlier, Cleave had the misfortune of picking up a tipsy American heiress who then died in his car. Wrongly imprisoned for her death but now free, he is suspicious when he picks up a bedraggled couple, recently kicked off an American cruise ship.

Suspicion soon turns to anxiety when a viral contagion overtakes the ship. A bloated body washed ashore ignites rumors, thoughtless acts, riots, and finally martial law. Hatcher's training as a historian is evident in this well-woven novel.

However, it's the cockroaches that are the true stars of the show. Sharp-witted, well-read, and with a long view of history, their voice is dignified, erudite, and often funny: "Woe to us, who suffer the curse of stubby little wings, vestigial appendages suitable for neither flying nor fanning ourselves on a hot day (one can hopefully appreciate our love of air conditioning in light of this one regrettable aspect of our anatomy.\*)" It would be wise to heed the narrators' observations, both on Hatcher's fictional world as well as political history and human shortcomings. Although hilarity abounds, Hatcher's take on colonialism, racial, and class divides is timely, powerfully imagined, and moving.

Although she now lives in Tucson, Arizona, author Alice Hatcher immediately accepted the invitation to our Awards Luncheon, and it will be exciting to hear from her.

## Young People's Literature Awards Committee

ANGELA GALL, *Chairman*

At our annual Awards' Luncheon on May 3rd, 2019, you will meet the authors of the Young People's Literature Awards. Here is more information about these excellent novels. Remember the books will be on sale at the luncheon, and you can get your copy signed by the author!

*American Panda* by Gloria Chao is both a heartfelt and hilarious story about a Taiwanese-American teen whose parents' rigid expectations force her to decide between a future of her own making that may or may not include her parents or a lifetime of unhappiness.

### Our committee members loved this book for so many reasons:

"I loved this book because it was fun and easy to read. I think young readers will really enjoy the books humor as



Gloria Chao

well as its strong moral." ~BETTY O'TOOLE

"This is a great story about ethnic identity and struggles with adapting." ~TANYA KLASSER

"This humorous, coming-of-age story about mother-daughter relationships will be very relatable to teenagers." ~COLLEEN KADLEC

"This book is so great because you learn a lot about Chinese culture from it." ~PEGGY KUZMINSKI

"The daily phone messages from the main character's 'helicopter' mother were especially hilarious because I know I will torture my daughter in much the same way when she goes off to college. I too will call the campus police if she doesn't call me back within the hour!" ~ANGELA GALL



***Darius the Great Is Not Okay* by Adib Khorram** is a powerful story of a teenage boy's battle with depression while navigating his place in his nuclear family in America, as well as his extended one in Iran.

**Our committee members loved this book for so many reasons:**

"I liked that this book addressed mental health issues. I loved how it captured people's feelings in a truly authentic way." ~DEB HALL REPPEN

"This novel is so immediate--the reader can really get into Darius' shoes. He is so vulnerable, and it's fun to see him develop. I also loved the background material about Iran. The author made me want to visit. (Quite a feat in today's world!) ~VIVIAN MORTENSEN

"I thought this book was award-winning because it was a captivating story covering two worlds--USA and Iran. It also covered depression and the difficulty of socialization. This book had so much to offer!" ~Peggy Kuzminski

"I enjoyed this book because the teen's struggles with mental illness affected me emotionally." ~COLLEEN KADLEC

"This book appealed to me because it portrayed the struggles of a boy trying to find himself and also the love of family." ~TANYA KLASSER

"This was such a powerful book because many of my relatives struggle with severe depression, and it is such a great

topic for teens to learn about and understand." ~ANGELA GALL

***Thank You, Omu!* by author/illustrator Oge Mora** is a remarkable children's story about community and sharing delivered to us by a generous grandmother and her delicious stew.

**Our committee members loved this book for so many reasons:**

"Loved the book, the story, the illustrations!" ~DEB HALL REPPEN

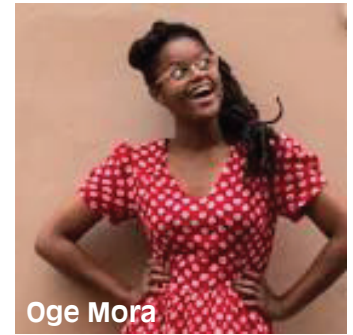
"This picture book offers lots for its young audience. It demonstrates sharing, a neighborhood community in an urban setting, and a variety of characters. The illustrations complement the story." ~Vivian Mortensen

"One word--Fabulous! One more word—Winner!!" ~PEGGY KUZMINSKI

"I loved its beautiful collage artwork." ~COLLEEN KADLEC

"I loved this warm, heartening story of a generous older woman and her wonderful community who repaid that kindness." ~TANYA KLASSER

I love that food was used to bring the community together. It makes me not care so much when I overeat because ultimately food equals love!" ~ANGELA GALL



## Other Books We Loved (But Couldn't Award) This Year

The Literature Awards Committee was lucky to receive many wonderful entries for our awards this year. These books generated excited discussion and created ardent fans among us. While we couldn't give every such book an award, we'd like to make you aware of some that provide a fine reading experience.

***Virgil Wander* by Leif Enger**  
by KAREN PULVER

Enger's third novel shows us a small, tightly connected Minnesota community on the shores of Lake Superior. Greenstone has essentially folded up after the nearby iron mine was depleted. Its remaining inhabitants are quirky and the plot nearly magical. Heroes appear and so do better natures.

Virgil, orphaned suddenly and forever asking life's big questions, opens the story as he is rescued after his car leaves the road and plunges into the frigid lake. His concussion causes memory loss, especially his ability to use adjectives.



Enter Rune, a Norwegian kite designer looking for his lost son and descendants. Virgil needs a housemate and Rune a place to keep warm, so the two settle in together.

Virgil owns the local movie theater that becomes the town's focus for entertainment and gathering, especially when he shows films from an

illegally held collection. Everyone shows up: Rune's grandson and daughter-in-law, the ambitious local real estate agent, Virgil's Samoan friend and his pet raccoon, and the town's snowplow contractor.

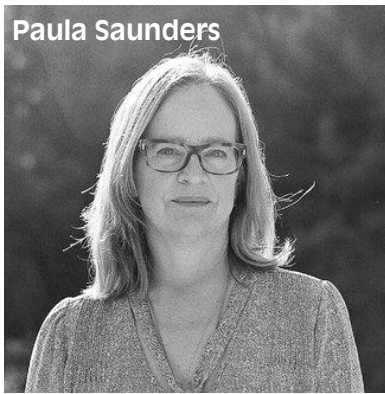
The author's strength is in his portrayal of the setting—the numbing cold, the treacherous roads and the dying small town trying its best to rally. His language is lyrical, yet it captures the terse commentary typical of Scandinavian Midwesterners. The characters are almost all likeable, all with

their flaws. Even the antagonists have their sympathetic sides. As Virgil's doctor Finn, who "had the heartening bulk of the aging athlete defeated by pastry," predicted, our protagonist regains his adjectives and carries on.

Enger's first novel, *Peace like a River*, was published in 2001 and gained literary acclaim. *Virgil Wander* finds him fully emerged as a serious writer.

### ***The Distance Home* by Paula Saunders**

by ROBERTA GATES



One of the rewards of being a reader on an awards committee is the opportunity to read wonderful books you never would have known about otherwise. My "discovery novel" this year was Paula Saunders's beautifully written debut entitled *The Distance Home*, which is the single best book I've read during my eleven

years on the adult literature awards committee.

A family saga based on her own South Dakota childhood, *The Distance Home* opens in the 1960s as Eve and Al are adjusting to married life in the basement apartment of Al's parents. After Leon and his sister, René, are born, the family moves from one isolated prairie town to another, where Eve holds down the fort while Al, a cattle broker, spends most of his time on the road.

Each parent has a favorite child. Al dotes on René, a precocious and competitive girl who succeeds at everything she tries; while Eve favors Leon, a gentle soul who stutters and is somewhat awkward. He also has "olive skin and from somewhere buried deep in the silence of the genetic line, the beautiful high cheekbones and broad nose of the Sioux." As if this weren't enough to set him apart, Eve, in an attempt to alleviate his clumsiness, enrolls him in a ballet class. To her surprise and his, Leon excels at dance. This makes Al very uncomfortable, but when René starts dancing too, he is thrilled with his little ballerina. And from here on out, the paths of the two siblings diverge in achingly painful ways.

As the only boy in his dance class, Leon endures brutal teasing, and it's no better at home where his father's withering disapproval is a constant. In one heartrending scene, dinner guests watch as Leon proudly shows off the tricks he's taught his dog, Chuck. Eve laughs and applauds, and even Al seems pleased, but then Leon accidentally knocks his plate onto the floor. "Chicken, bones, peas, bits of potato, and cranberry fly into the air, then fall and spill over the carpet" as Al, "his face on fire," chastises Leon, calling him a "damn dumb Indian." Leon is then sent outside to the patio, where he sits "on the ledge, his legs hanging down to nowhere, his arm around Chuck," while René takes over, entertaining the company with

a one-handed cartwheel, a headstand, the splits, and other gymnastic feats.

Eventually Eve decides to open a dance academy of her own, and to advertise it she has a photographer take some publicity shots of 14-year-old Leon, not realizing until it's too late that the man is a predator. The next day Leon tells her, while "wiping tears from the naked red rims of his eyes," that he's quitting ballet. After that, it's downhill for Leon, who starts flunking his classes, preferring instead to drink whiskey or smoke pot with friends.

In the wake of Leon's collapse, "the mantle of improving oneself, of reaching one's potential, of attaining some increasingly mysterious lofty height settles solely on René's shoulders," and she leaves home while still in high school to study dance in Phoenix. Though the regime is a lonely and strenuous one, René grabs this opportunity and, just like Saunders herself, makes it to New York City where she dances professionally.

Saunders, by giving each of her characters a voice, is able to present a searing yet sympathetic portrait of one dysfunctional family. Her larger and more universal concern, however, is what happens to both "winners" and "losers" in a culture where striving and power dominate.

### ***Samuel Johnson's Eternal Return* by Martin Riker**

by KAREN BURNETT



Rarely, do you read a book that challenges your perception of what you believe and interjects a new paradigm of thinking into your mind. Do I believe in any form of re-incarnation? Not really. But in this novel, new father Samuel Johnson dies, and finds himself in a journey through an American half-century, inhabiting others' lives. Whenever Sam's lost soul's host body dies, he immediately inhabits the live body closest by.

This circumstance may sound improbable, but it comes across as a testament to human will. Sam has a mission: to reunite with or at least check up on his son who was 4 years old the first time Sam was killed.

In his early life, Sam grows up in an off-the-grid community, and the arrival of a television in Unityville, his hometown in central Pennsylvania, frames a major theme. Samuel becomes increasingly addicted to the television. The television is a symbol of observing the world without being actually in it, of being trapped in front of a screen with no ability to participate. Yet though Sam doesn't have much of a story of his own, he develops an incredible need to live by any means possible.

Some of the bodies that Samuel Johnson inhabits are not what we might expect in our own visions of reincarnation: a nearly comatose elderly woman, a belligerent alcoholic, a heroin-addicted young woman with terrible taste in men. But the adventures of Sam in these beings are captivating, over

time illustrating changes in society, the media, consumerism, and Samuel's ability (or inability) to control the bodies that he inhabits for short periods of time, a power that inevitably furthers him on his quest to find his way home.

The book is ingenious, often humorous. It shows people as slaves to their selfish vices. But, it is provocative, and you may consider time and death in a way you haven't before imagined.

***Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway Revolution* by Todd Purdum**

by TAMMIE BOB



While the author is already way too successful to win our prize for newish authors, we did find this book a trove of gossip, nostalgia, and fun—a very well researched book into the times and lives of the men behind the musicals we love...

Already well known in the field of music, both Rodgers and Hammerstein were each at a critical juncture when they decided to work together. Rod-

gers was coming to the end of a highly successful but increasingly tumultuous working relationship with Larry Hart. And Hammerstein, despite numerous past triumphs, had endured more than a decade of misfires, with some wondering if he had lost his touch.

Each was looking for a story with substance for their next project. This they found in Lynn Riggs's play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which became the basis for their first joint effort, the 1943 Broadway musical *Oklahoma!*

While perhaps not deliberately setting out to reinvent musical theater, with *Oklahoma!* Rodgers and Hammerstein did just that. They seamlessly integrated music and songs into the story to move the plot along, chose to begin the show without an overture, and incorporated dance as a central part of the plot. *Oklahoma!* wasn't the first stage work to make use of these techniques, but, as the book points out, it was the first show to use them all.

Purdum covers the entire *Oklahoma!* gestation period, paying particular attention to the processes by which each man would create and then modify his various musical contributions. The creative process for the lyrics and libretto is covered more extensively for each of the Rodgers and Hammerstein projects, as the mechanics of composing don't work as well in a written narrative (though Purdum does do a good job describing how Rodgers found bits of inspiration for his scores).

After two initial chapters, respectively chronicling each man's career prior to working together, the succeeding pages detail their various projects as a team. For example, the two often explored controversial subjects in their work: among them, spousal abuse for *Carousel* (Rodgers's personal favorite of all

the shows he worked on), cultural differences for *The King and I* and *Flower Drum Song*, and interracial romance for *South Pacific*. Purdum notes that the duo's solution to these topics doesn't always wear well in the #MeToo era.

The author is also quick to avoid laying the entire credit for their successes directly at Rodgers and Hammerstein's feet. The contributions made by other members of each show's creative team—from Agnes de Mille to Joshua Logan—and the professional ups and down with each are all carefully explored.

Just as fascinating are the sections devoted to the Rodgers and Hammerstein shows that did not do as well as the team had hoped. *Allegro* was a work Hammerstein always thought deserved another chance. The show's main character, a young doctor, finds he has so many demands on his time that he can no longer practice medicine.

This issue resonated with the men, for as their successes snowballed, neither seemed to have time to do what they loved. In the wake of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, Rodgers noted that "there was just no letup. ... Every day required an unending stream of decisions," from business and marketing concerns to casting problems, which left little time for the actual creative process.

And both deeply distrusted Hollywood. Due to their often hands-off approach when it came to the filming of their stage works (other than *Oklahoma!* with which they were intimately involved), the film frequently ended up a pale imitation of the stage version. Coupled with this was the fact that by the time their final collaboration, *The Sound of Music*, opened on Broadway in November of 1959, critics were beginning to see Rodgers and Hammerstein as old-fashioned and increasingly out of step with the world. Rodgers would battle this perception in the years after Hammerstein's death, in his subsequent works with other collaborators.

Yet existing as a sort of through-line in the book is an examination of the Rodgers and Hammerstein relationship, and the lack of one. The two apparently decided early on to present a united front in public. This is why no record exists of any disputes between them, at least as presented in the book. Their good front to the world went so far as giving no explanation for a nearly yearlong split in the early 1950s, and similarly, no reason for their reconciliation.

It's also why, when evidence of hurt feelings actually did come to light, it seemed that much more significant. One time, Hammerstein exploded and shared his feelings with a third party about how Hammerstein felt Rodgers wasn't respecting his work on a particular lyric; another was when Rodgers felt slighted because Hammerstein and his wife were planning a trip and didn't invite Rodgers and his spouse along. Perhaps most telling of all is Purdum's comment that "to the end of their days, each maintained that he'd never been sure whether the other really liked him."

*Something Wonderful* offers a fascinating look at two men who produced some of the most enduring classics in the history of musical theater. Whether you just have a general interest in the genre or you're a hardcore devotee, this book is definitely a worthwhile read.



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***Oranges* by Gary Eldon Peter**

BY IDA HAGMAN



A good book is one that improves with subsequent readings. *Oranges* by Gary Eldon Peter is such a book. It is a series of closely linked short stories about a gay man struggling, as we all do, to make sense of his life. The book gives us a realistic glimpse into this young man's life and work. In the

first story, Michael, the narrator, describes how he recalls the names of Academy Award winners in order to fall asleep.

That is his coping method for insomnia. This original character trait piqued my interest. Michael goes on to describe how he met his boyfriend Kevin and the struggles in their relationship, which are significant. Kevin is HIV positive.

Michael works as a "psychiatric counseling associate." His description of the patients and his work are visceral. I had the sense of a curtain being pulled back to see what it would be like to work with severely depressed patients in a hospital.

*Oranges* won the New Rivers Press Many Voices Project, and it is easy to see why. It has the ring of authenticity. The writing is spare and subtle. The drama is low key, but this is appropriate for a story of this gay man growing up in the midwest. When I picked up *Oranges* again to write this review, I enjoyed it even more than my first reading. It really gives us a chance to walk in someone else's shoes.



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